

Growing Up Avis

by Peter Blackledge

Mike: Earlier this year, I began contemplating what I could best give to you — the man who has everything — for your 79th birthday. After extensive deep and prolonged internal deliberation, I arrived at what I hope you will feel is the perfect gift. Seeing you pour your time, energy, and heart so deeply into developing a compendium of “Blackledge Stories”, the perfect gift for you suddenly became obvious to me: I would write for you a series of new “Blackledge Stories” about you and me, providing my most cherished memories of our growing up together. And I would write these as a tribute to the extraordinary older brother which you are.



Pete (age 2) at Mike's 8th birthday, 1949

When I was growing up in Houston, Texas, Avis Rent-A-Car had a well-known slogan “We're Number Two, so we try harder” — referring to their always being second to Hertz. And so it was with me regarding my older brother Mike. Mike was perfect in every area: Straight-A Student; Natural Athlete who was always chosen first for our neighborhood football games; Popular, Handsome, Gregarious, and Loved & Esteemed by all. I sadly was none of those.

When teams were chosen to play football on the neighborhood vacant lot, Mike was always either a Captain or chosen first; I was the skinny, gangly kid who always heard the inevitable words of the final chooser: “Well, I guess we're stuck with Pete.” Each pass-play plan, from every team Captain, would sound sadly similar: “Frank, you go out to the right. Howard, you do a button hook to the left. Frankie, you block, and then turn around for a short pass. Pete.....Pete, you just go long”. And no matter how hard I ran to execute my appointed play-task, and how loudly I then yelled from the End Zone “I'm open! I'm open!”, the ball was never thrown in my direction. I became the derided, invisible neighborhood football joke: “Go Long, Pete!”

The football games often ended when Mrs. Chalmers, our neighbor across the street, would appear on her doorstep and yell loudly to her sons about their favorite television show: “Howard, Roddy: *Spin And Marty* is on!” Then, as the teams disbanded, with the sun dimming, Mike and I would walk back toward our house. Mike would wave and easily yell out to our neighbor as we passed near their house: “Hi, Mrs. Chalmers!” I unfortunately was too shy to even look up, and too nervous about my ever-present stutter to say anything.

At *Rio Vista Summer Camp*, Mike received every accolade. He was immediately and



consistently chosen for the prized “Flaming Arrow” award by the Camp Counselors due to his exemplary conduct and performance, and was also chosen by all his fellow campers for the ultimate award of “White Arrow” for being the most popular and admired camper of all. I wanted so badly and deeply to achieve at least one of those awards, and I tried and tried and tried — but despite Mike’s easily and naturally winning those awards each and every year, I could never attain even one of them, despite our many years at *Rio Vista*.

In school, I always followed in the wake and shadow of Mike. Mike was a perennial Straight A student through *Roberts Elementary School*, *Pershing Junior High School*, and *Lamar Senior High School*. At *Lamar*, he additionally was elected President of the National Honor Society, and qualified as a National Merit Scholarship Semi-Finalist. Again, I could not achieve any of those, struggling to maintain my B’s and even C’s.



ADB with #1 son Mike and #2 son Pete, c. 1950.

Throughout my growing up, I could intellectually understand our father constantly referring to Mike as his “Number One Son”, albeit those words took on a darker emotional feeling in light of my glaring inadequacies in contrast to Mike’s “Golden Boy” status. Everything just seemed to come so easily to Mike. For me, everything was a struggle. What stung most were our Mother’s words to me: “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” It hurt deeply when I overheard our mother talking on the phone and saying “Peter is such a disappointment.”

But none of this was Mike’s fault; he was always a good brother, putting up with his hapless 6-year younger brother. I idolized and revered Mike. When, as a member of the sixth grader Audio Visual Team, Mike and his “big boy” classmates would periodically enter my Kindergarten classroom at our mutual *Roberts Elementary School*, to set up for educational films, I would proudly point to him and excitedly

whisper to my classmates “That’s my big brother!”

And I wanted to be like him, attempting to emulate Mike in his every endeavor. When Mike started a Stamp Collection, I started a Stamp Collection. And when Mike wisely informed me there was a secret weapon more deadly than the Atomic Bomb or the Nuclear Bomb, called the “Cobalt Bomb”, I — with a 5-year-old’s swagger — sagaciously announced that precious, inside Information to my fellow wide-eyed kindergarteners. And when Mike one day came into our bedroom displaying a fistful of dollar bills, explaining to me that he had sold the excess wire hangers from our home to

the neighborhood Dry Cleaners, I immediately ran through our house — pulling clothes off their wire hangers, and tossing those clothes unceremoniously onto the floor, in order to gain their precious wire hangers.

Unfortunately, as with most of my emulations of Mike, that attempt to “Be Like Mike” was not successful. The owner of the Dry Cleaners — when I arrived there, beaming with hope over the envisioned compensation for my purloined wire hangers — crouched down, sad-faced, and put a sympathetic hand on my shoulder as he imparted the bad news: His Dry Cleaners already had more wire hangers than needed, but he had paid Mike for his wire hangers due to being impressed with Mike’s creativity and industry. I, crestfallen, slinked back home, only to be confronted by my irate Mother, angrily asking me why all the clothes were lying on the ground.



But there were several occasions, which I today still cherish, in which my Perfect Older Brother personally complimented me, his woefully inadequate Hapless Little Brother. Those Seven Compliments encouraged me and sustained me, giving me hope and direction.

The First Compliment from Mike occurred circa 1958 in the confines of our small shared bedroom at 2307 Gramercy Street. Mike and I had many innocent brotherly tussles in that 1950s Texas style bunk-bed “Ultimate Warrior Death-Match Steel Cage”. In this incident, Mike had cornered me on my lower bunk bed, where I hid cowering beneath my tattered cotton bedspread. Mike began asserting his dominance by playfully stabbing me through my covering blanket with our Mother’s omnipresent wooden yardstick — not with malice or harm, but with shouted utterances expressing his authority with each thrust, as he waited for my always-previously-occurring whiny plea “I Give”.

I, being grateful for even this display of idolized Mike’s attention and Brotherly Love, was actually giggling beneath the bedspread. Previously, I had always obsequiously accepted Mike’s dominance, and it seemed this event would end that same way. I had to endure Mike’s jabs until he grew tired or I submitted with my usual “I Give”. But then, suddenly, new and totally different words surprisingly sprang to my 11 year old lips — perhaps delivered there by *The Patron Saint Of Persecuted Little Brothers* — as I uncharacteristically yelled out: “Who do you think I am — Polonius?”

Mike suddenly and completely stopped his attack, stunned initially into silence, and then uncharacteristically into stammering “My God, this guy even has literary references”, and in shock immediately left the room. Wow!!! I had found an “Intellectual” chink in Mike’s previously impervious Big Brother armor. I now had a new and important “Be Like Mike” goal: Become a learned and well-read person; become an intellectual;

become a “Renaissance Man.” I was ebullient in my discovery, and resolute in my new determination.

The next Compliment from Mike came circa 1963. Throughout his life, Mike had extraordinary discipline. Every day when he came home from school, before going outside to play football or basketball with our neighborhood friends, Mike would sit down and do all his homework. And each night, before going to bed, Mike would do his evening regimen of pushups. I sadly never had any semblance of such discipline. But, in hopes of becoming stronger and more athletic like my big brother — and disdainful of my scrawny physique while being impressed by the weightlifting results of my new neighborhood friend Leo Thomas — for Christmas circa 1959 I asked my father for a set of weights.

Dad no doubt fully expected me to abandon that pursuit like I had every other. But now, I was determined. Every afternoon, I would be out in our cold Spartan concrete-floored garage, pressing and bench-pressing and curling until my shocked muscles screamed for relief — and then I would do even more, pushing myself beyond pain and exhaustion. And when I had outgrown that simple weight set, I took my determination to the local YMCA and began attacking the Olympic weights and expanded equipments available there.

In the Summer of 1963, Mike had, once again, perfectly fulfilled our Father’s dream, by graduating from our Father’s beloved Alma Mater: the United States Naval Academy (USNA). In fact, Mike had been even more perfect, dramatically surpassing our Father’s modest achievements by graduating seventh in his USNA Class of 1963, and first in his class in mathematics.

Returning home after graduating from his four years at USNA, Mike came to that YMCA to play basketball with his best high school friend, Travis. During his YMCA visit, Mike came down to the YMCA weight lifting room, where he encountered a transformed little brother. The four years of my heavy weightlifting, while Mike was at USNA, had packed impressive muscle into my previous Wally Cox - Barney Fife frame. As he came into my YMCA weightlifting domicile, I was anxious to demonstrate my new power. Pressing an Olympic 135 pound barbell over my 165 pound body, I watched with one hopeful eye for Mike’s reaction. He didn’t say anything, but he nodded approval. MY BIG BROTHER HAD NODDED APPROVAL TO ME. It felt like “The Nod Heard Round The World.” A new “Little Brother” determination emerged: I was going to be strong, I was going to be an athlete, I was going to be the best, I was going to be unbeatable.

The Third Compliment from Mike came in 1965. Mike was home on military leave, and happened to walk out onto our Gramercy driveway where I — now a Senior at Houston’s *Lamar Senior High School* — was preparing for a date with a new girl at Lamar. “Cheryl” had recently transferred to *Lamar* from East Texas, and she had tearfully told me during our first conversation, at our lockers after Civics class how difficult it was being the “new girl in school”, and how deeply she missed her home in small-town Tyler, Texas.

She wistfully recounted the beautiful, clear East Texas night sky, perfectly illuminated by its glowing crescent moon and a thousand twinkling stars and her eyes sparkled as she described the smell of Tyler Roses, the omnipresent pine cones, Tyler’s beautiful and unique Red Earth, and even the comforting staccato of Tyler’s pumping oil wells and the

sound of water softly lapping against the shore of Tyler Lake. Cheryl had touched my heart, and I wanted to somehow reach out and support her by at least temporarily transporting her back to the solace of her Tyler home. And so, I had spent considerable time fashioning a Crescent Moon out of silver cardboard, then fastening it and a galaxy of Silver Stars to the interior roof of my prized '57 Chevy. I had sprinkled dirt which I had dyed red on my Chevy's floor, along with pine cones, and had strategically placed a facsimile oil well derrick on my Chevy's back seat. And on a portable tape recorder, I had captured the sounds of pumping oil wells and lapping waters.

Mike told me he was impressed not only with my creativity, but also with my reaching out to Cheryl in support. As with the "Polonius" incident many years earlier, I had serendipitously found a second avenue to Mike's esteem: Creativity and Support To Others. I was elated, and added those additional goals to my Little Brother list of determinations.

Additionally, I wonderfully and unexpectedly received a second — and enduring — compliment from Cheryl. We can never know how one simple act of kindness and caring can deeply affect another person. Not only that night, but continuing during our resultant half century of love and friendship, and her subsequent career as an award-winning, best-selling author and poet. Cheryl later told me that she had years later won first place in a radio station call-in contest for "The Best Date Ever" by relating her account of that evening, had additionally written several published poems about that evening, and had a newspaper article about it published in Houston's most prestigious newspaper, *The Houston Post*. She had entitled her writings "The Perfect Date", as the true story of her ("Silver Stars") and my ("Military Bars") special evening.

The Fourth Compliment from Mike came to me two years later, in the Summer of 1967.

I had been accepted into the United States Naval Academy (USNA), and was pleasantly surprised to be able to attend the same institution as my eminently more qualified older brother and our revered Father. Unfortunately, many of my attempts to emulate my extraordinary brother also had unintended adverse consequences — and so it was initially with this. Again, I was struggling at the Naval Academy, where Mike had, as always, done so exceptionally well, and so easily. In my freshman year, during a particularly callous interrogation of me at the dinner table by an upper-classman, the upperclassman learned of the accomplishments of Mike. At that point, this upperclassman turned to his colleagues at the dinner table and loudly, jeeringly, disdainfully announced that my poor performance, compared to my brother Mike's, showed that my mother obviously had sex with the milkman to have me. I was devastated.

After I tearfully related the incident to my parents, I uncharacteristically received a personal, empathetic letter from my mother, assuring me that she never was unfaithful to my father. But, in the midst of such despair, there was a bright light. When I was first accepted to the Naval Academy, my father suggested that I try out for the Crew (Rowing) team at USNA. I had serious doubts that a mediocre-at-best athlete such as I could hope to make the Crew Team at USNA — which just the previous year had fully swept the first place National Champion medals in every event at the Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA) National Championships. But I was determined to go hard for it.

What I happily discovered that was all my “Avis” years of trying harder had imbued me with a singular discipline and determination which — coupled with the focused regimen of weightlifting which I had undertaken years earlier in hopes of being more like my natural-athlete older brother — had amazingly hardened me into a formidable athlete. I not only made First Boat on the Freshman and Varsity USNA Crew Team, I was able — despite my being one of the skinniest oarsmen on the team — to win the coveted “Six Seat”, which is the Power Seat where competitive crews generally place their strongest Oarsman. And, in the Summer of 1967, this transformed Texas kid — who had never even seen a Racing Shell before entering USNA in the Summer of 1965 — won the 2V8 Intercollegiate Rowing Association National Championships. But an even greater elation came to me when I subsequently showed my National Champion medal to Mike. He looked at it for what seemed to me to be an eternity, deep in thought as he kept rolling it between his thumb and forefingers. Finally, he handed my National Champion medal back to me, uttering only two words: “Good Job”. Just two words, which perhaps would not mean much to most people. But to this seriously flawed little brother, who had given his heart to two decades of “Avis” striving to be recognized by his perfect big brother, they meant the world.

Mike’s Fifth Compliment to me came after our father passed away. And this is definitely more than just a compliment, and is the most treasured. Mike and I attended the funeral for our father at Arlington National Cemetery. Because our father was a Navy Captain, he was accorded special honors at Arlington. This included participation by ceremonial Marines. The lead Marine, after Dad’s burial, performed a very impressive and perfect slow folding of Dad’s flag. He then executed a series of crisp military turns to take that Flag to Mike, as the eldest son, and bent to execute a beautiful, slow presentation of the Flag to Mike, with the words “On behalf of a grateful nation” — then taking two steps back and saluting Mike.

Dad’s passing had been extremely hard for me, for three primary reasons: (1) I was the Son Of His Elder Years. And like the Biblical account of Jacob and Joseph, that gave us a special closeness. That closeness had been deepened after Dad retired at his age of 65 and my age of 15. Thus he suddenly had more time with me than he had been able to afford his other children, particularly during his long absences in World War II; (2) Dad had been my Rock, never losing faith in me, never criticizing me, always encouraging me; (3) While Dad’s four other children had



assumed new primary identities of Spouse and Parent, I had proudly retained my primary identity of being “My Father’s Son”. Now, my primary identity was suddenly gone. It was for me a particularly devastating loss. Mike knew all of this. Accordingly, after he received Dad’s flag from the ceremonial Marine, Mike, wearing his Air Force Officer uniform, as the ceremonial Marine had done, executed a series of military turns, completing them immediately in front of me, whereupon he slowly bent forward and put Dad’s flag in my hands. I have never been so deeply touched.

Mike’s Sixth Compliment to me came when we were at our sister Patti’s house, after Patti had just completed a series of very difficult and painful Radiations for Cancer, at the M. D. Anderson Clinic in Houston. As is often the tradition at Cancer clinics, when a patient successfully completes Cancer treatment, the patient announces and celebrates that success by ringing a special bell at the Clinic. I had been deeply worried about Patti’s Cancer, particularly with this being her second occurrence, and I had been on my knees praying fervently for her every night. Thus, her successful completion of Cancer treatment was very important to both of us, and I wanted to specially commemorate it and honor Patti.

So I tracked down a brass bell similar to the bell she had rung, as shown in the celebratory email photo she had sent. I had that bell mounted on a varnished wooden plaque, and below the bell had mounted a brass plate with the words from Patti’s celebratory email, and my added words of honor and love to her. When Patti unwrapped that surprise gift from me in front of Mike and me, she collapsed in tears of joy. It was obvious that the trauma and subsequent relief she felt from that Cancer event were flowing forth. And it was one of only two times that I had seen the normally stoic Mike become emotional (the other being at the Memorial ceremony in his home after his wife Helen had passed away). Mike and Patti have always been extremely close, and the emotion Patti was displaying was evidently also touching Mike emotionally. As Mike turned to me, there appeared to possibly be some mist in his eyes, as he simply said to me: “Good job, Pete”. Those words from Mike meant so very much to me.



Mike’s Seventh and Final Compliment came following my retirement from 37 years of Government service. As word apparently spread through the Defense Industry about my planned retirement, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that numerous major companies had evidently been following my career — and senior representatives from more than a dozen of those companies now appeared on my doorstep with extravagant offers for employment. A three-star Vice Admiral who was a USNA Class of 1963 classmate of Mike’s was leading the pursuit of me by Booz Allen Hamilton — a major Russell 1000 company — and I was also being taken to repeated lunches by a top official of Science

Applications International Corporation (SAIC) — a Fortune 500 company — and by senior executives of Lockheed Martin, The Mitre Corporation, and many more.

Just as he had done when I was trying to determine from which company or Government organization to accept employment decades earlier, when I had decided to transition from Naval Officer to Civilian Navy Engineer-Manager, it was Mike who helped me decide. In this last employment decision of my career, Mike felt it was particularly impressive that SAIC was recruiting me to be their Vice President, and that I would be directly working with top Admirals in the Pentagon. Based on Mike's wise counsel, I selected SAIC — and, as with Mike's suggestion decades earlier that I should accept Navy Department employment over Industry employment, it was definitely the best decision and led to be among the most rewarding years of my career. After I became Vice President at SAIC, Mike actually shocked me with his Seventh and Final Compliment — definitely the kindest and most laudatory of all: "Pete, you are the most successful of ALL of us five Blackledge Siblings." WOW WOW WOW. How did that happen? How did I, "The Least Of These", become worthy of such praise by my revered older brother, "The First, The Greatest"?

As I considered Mike's wonderful and surprising Seventh Compliment, his kind and cherished words caused me to reflect on all the beautiful Life experiences with which I had been blessed. And the answer to my above question became clear:

I realized that every one of the Life Achievements by this skinny, shy, wayward, and unaccomplished kid from Texas can be directly traced to my striving to emulate and gain the respect of my idolized older brother and to the encouragement and support of your Seven Compliments. And so, on this your 79th birthday as you and I now enter the Autumn of our lives, I want to express my deep appreciation and love for you, my gratitude for the 73 years we have shared together, and my greatest thanks for all that you have done to support and encourage me as I was "Growing Up Avis." I could not ask for a better brother.



Then and later: (left) Pete and Mike, Gramercy Blvd, Houston [c. 1952] with Shamrock Hotel background; (right) Mike salutes Pete at Patti's house in Ransom Canvon. TX [c. 1992].